

## Winds in the Pit:

### *the Commissioning and Composition of the Opera Bandanna*

by Daron Hagen and Michael Haithcock

Combining the burgeoning band movement and the historic culture of opera, a new evening-long opera entitled *Bandanna* by American composer Daron Hagen and Irish librettist Paul Muldoon will receive its fully-staged world première on 25 February 1999 during the bi-annual conference of the College Band Directors National Association (CBDNA) at the University of Texas Austin. The first half of this article describes the commissioning process that culminated in *Bandanna*, as well as the work's significance to the band medium; the second half of the article gives an idea of the new opera itself.

#### 1. The Commissioning Process, by Michael Haithcock

Shortly after the 1997 CBDNA conference, I succeeded Tom Duffy, Director of Bands at Yale University, as chairman of the CBDNA commissioning committee. Duffy's brilliant service had produced several significant additions to the repertoire, including John Harbison's ballet *Olympic Dances*, which was premièred during the 1997 conference. As the new chair, my first action was to seek Duffy's advice regarding future CBDNA commissions. The CBDNA commissions a major work for each of its bi-annual conventions; yet, because the Harbison project had required so many resources, no firm commissioning plans had yet been made. A recent survey of CBDNA members showed that many wanted a song cycle, a concerto written for a major artist, a ballet, or an opera - each to be written with winds as the accompanying resource. This survey prompted the Harbison commission, so I set about to make another of these dreams come true.

In the summer of 1991, while presenting a session at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music summer conducting workshop entitled, "Whom Should We Commission?", I shared my files on the newest sounds and faces in the world of composition and the significance of various prizes in composition. The gathered conductors were urged to create their own process for exploring the current compositional scene; suggestions were made for possible commissions. One rising star whose name came up was Daron Hagen. Recent premières by the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, as well as glowing reviews of his chamber music, art songs, and especially his Frank Lloyd Wright opera *Shining Brow*, made him a highly desirable candidate.

Old research now merged with new responsibility. It seemed obvious that Hagen's musical gifts were ideal for an opera with band in the pit. Hagen's song cycles clearly illustrate a captivating melodic lyricism and exquisite text settings. Ned Rorem had written about Hagen in a recent issue of *Opera News*:

"Daron knows that all music sings. He can compose convincingly for the human voice and for instruments. He can compose inherently fast music and inherently slow music. And he knows the difference between large-scale theater and the miniature drama called song. He is ripe for opera."

I found equal affirmation for Daron's collaboration with the poet Paul Muldoon, who had written librettos for two Hagen operas, *Shining Brow* and *Vera of Las Vegas*. *Brow*, in particular, had received international critical acclaim and had even been a commercial success for the company that had commissioned it. Reviews of new operas often speak favorably of the music or of the libretto, but seldom of both. Common sense dictated that the CBDNA commission a creative team with a successful track record together: the Hagen and Muldoon team rose to

the top of the list. Finally, a quote attributed to the composer convinced me to make the initial contact in early March of 1997:

"Music stands on common ground. So long as composers believe in the need for creation and recreation, music will bless us with countless fresh ayres."

The 'fresh air' reflected in his statement, the previous exploration of his music, and the two band works listed among his compositions each gave me hope as I sent an exploratory e-mail to a voice I knew musically but not personally. Our initial exchange of e-mail led to a flurry of phone calls and a growing realization that Daron would be eager to write an opera for CBDNA. Astonished, I watched as the pieces fell into place allowing the première to take place in 1999.

Within ninety days contracts were signed. Muldoon and Hagen began to write. Eighty colleges and universities joined CBDNA in contributing the funds necessary to make this project possible. Hagen has also produced two works extracted from the opera. They will receive their première at the Austin conference as well: *Overture to Bandanna*, a seven-minute concert work, and a thirteen-minute suite from the opera called *Wedding Dances and Epiphany*. The suite comprises seven sections, each of which may be performed separately. Both call for standard band instrumentation at the grade 4 or 5 level of difficulty and will be available from Carl Fischer, Inc. after 1 March 1999. As an added bonus, six free-standing set pieces from the opera for solo voice or vocal ensemble with band accompaniment are available for performance. The result of this ground-breaking project for our repertoire is a grand opera suitable for full-stage or concert production which has spawned eight (or even fourteen, if the individual movements of the suite are counted) separate works suitable for concert programming.

#### 2. *Bandanna*, by Daron Hagen

Set in the Autumn of 1968 on the Day of the Dead, *Bandanna* is a radical rethinking of the tragedy of the Venetian prince Othello. In our opera, the Moor becomes the Hispanic police chief of a tiny town straddling the Mexican-US border. He and his lieutenants are recent Vietnam veterans, haunted by their service. "To live is to sleep / to die to awaken", Paul explains in the libretto. Our characters are fighting for their souls, morally and ethically, in Wallace Stevens' zone of 'ghostlier demarcations'. In this case, Melville's 'infinite sea' is the desert of southern Texas. The border is more than a state of mind, it is literally the battleground between good and evil.

*Bandanna* is a two act opera wherein the words and music, besides telling a story, explore the liminal zone between American-style 'lyrics' and 'musicals' on the one hand and European-style 'poetry' and 'opera' on the other. It is an opera about seduction and moral relativism versus moral absolutism whose characters are articulate but middlebrow. The libretto combines conventional lyric-writing and libretto-writing techniques. *Shining Brow*, my first work with words by Paul Muldoon, was intended to be a mainstream, traditional take on the operatic medium; my second, *Vera of Las Vegas*, was intended to lurch leftwards toward the avant garde; *Bandanna* is meant to be a move to the right, toward the music-theater world of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

The collaboration began when I sent Paul a number of carefully-chosen lyrics, such as 'The Best of All Possible Worlds', from Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, the Balcony Scene and 'Tonight', from *West Side Story*, Cole Porter's 'Night and Day', and 'I Get a Kick Out of You', Gershwin's 'The Man I Love' and 'Embraceable You', Sondheim's tour de force 'Soon', 'Now', and 'Later' sequence from *A Little Night Music*, among others. Along with each lyric I sent an analysis of its corresponding musical structure, pointing out the so-called 'first and second eight's', the difference between various kinds of introductions, verses, bridges, and choruses, the power of using the 'release' of a lyric to highlight the song's central image, and so on. The aim was to expand our normal operatic vocabulary by together utilising techniques and

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formal structures normally used by lyricists and songwriters. So that form might adequately express function in an opera whose central theme concerns 'ghostlier demarcations', the genres of song and opera were brought into constant collision.

Unlike in traditional song, our 'choruses' and 'refrains' served as opportunities to do successive variations on previously heard words and music that moved the drama forward. Paul created 'parallel poems' throughout so that, when solos were combined into ensembles, each character's words would rhyme with all the others', even though they were describing different emotional states, upping the customary musical and textual stakes and creating *meta* texts. All the sung dialogues were written in couplets, and in setting them I strictly notated the smooth movement from spoken dialogue to *parlando* to *arioso* and back again.

As with *Brow*, we began by co-writing a highly-detailed, 'filmic' treatment. Dramatic events were mapped out and the amount of time to be spent on each was decided. We then agreed on a musical/lyrical structure to underpin that drama. For example, the expository first scene of *Bandanna* is fifteen minutes long and functions much like a symphonic rondo. Here, to give an idea of the process, is a page from our plan for that scene:

	Musical/Dramatic Description of section	Duration
X	INTRO: (instrumental) onstage mariachi band	60"
A	CHORUS: townspeople (verse#1)	30"
B	CHORUS: townspeople (refrain)	30"
C	SCENE: Emily and Mona Scene (couplets)	45"
A	CHORUS: townspeople (verse #2)	30"
B	CHORUS: townspeople (refrain with new words)	30"
D	SOLO: Jake (parallel poem #1)	45"
A	CHORUS: townspeople (verse #3)	30"
B	CHORUS: townspeople (refrain with new words)	30"
D	SOLO: Cassidy (parallel poem#2)	45"
A	CHORUS: townspeople (verse#4)	30"
B	CHORUS: townspeople (refrain with new words)	30"
D	SOLO: Kane (parallel poem #3)	45"
C	SCENE: Jake, Cassidy and Kane Scene (couplets)	45"
D	TRIO: Jake, Cassidy and Kane (combination of all three parallel poems plus chorus commentary beneath)	45"
X+A+B	FIST FIGHT: Entire Company, Orch and mariachi band (fragments of words from A+B plus a new setting of the text for the intro tune)	90"
C	SCENE: Morales (couplets)	45"
X	CHORUS: mariachi singers sing X words to intro tune	60"
B	OUTRO: orchestral segue into next scene	30"

While magnificently internalising all that we had discussed about lyrics, Paul also radically simplified his usually highly allusive and poetically dense language and imagery to more closely suit the backgrounds of *Bandanna's* characters. Nevertheless, the more intensely felt the emotion, and the more highly educated the character in *Bandanna*, the more sophisticated the words and music were allowed to become. Despite the fact that we utilised song forms, *Bandanna* is not a 'numbers' opera. The 'dramatic arcs' are longer than in our other operas, and larger swatches of melody are brought back for further development; yet all three, in order not to interrupt the flow of dramatic tension, avoided 'full stops' - places where the audience is being cued to applaud.

Inevitably, I must comment on the opera's instrumentation. Yes, there are no strings in the pit. As a composer, I never missed them. I bristle when I encounter eye-rolling skeptics from the opera world who can't imagine an opera without strings. They forget that nearly every musical currently running on Broadway is scored primarily for winds, augmented with only a small handful of strings. The traditional pit orchestra paradigm has long been reversed in the commercial theater. Even the current revival of Bernstein's *On the Town* has been re-orchestrated and the strings omitted entirely. *Bandanna* banishes strings from the pit, but features, along with two trumpets, guitar, and bass, three onstage violinists as strolling mariachi musicians. Life, onstage, is juxtaposed with the afterlife - a heavenly chorus positioned in the balconies of the theatre who sing only the Latin words of the Catholic Mass. The winds in the pit are associated with the breath of life itself, the three mariachi violins onstage with the afterlife, coming to the fore only once, when

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they halo from offstage the doomed Mona's final prayer and her death at the hands of her own husband.

Mainstream professional opera companies in the United States are usually enmeshed in contracts with their local orchestra's management which require the services of string players whether or not they have been called for by the composer. This is only natural, since (a) orchestra management has to cover its payroll and (b) the operatic repertoire as yet contains few works calling specifically for wind ensemble in the pit. *The Good Soldier Schweik* is a noteworthy exception to the rule. In addition, despite the fact that the contemporary wind ensemble is one of the most exciting, rapidly growing, compositional genres in American music, many opera and orchestra music directors feel as though they are condescending when they conduct wind ensemble repertoire. It is still unclear whether or not these facts will pose a significant financial deterrent to *Bandanna's* entry into the major American houses. I am optimistic that the enthusiasm for the work that will be generated by successful college and semi-professional productions, along with productions by a visionary professional company or two and a good commercial recording, will overcome this obstacle.

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Daron Hagen was educated at University of Wisconsin, the Curtis Institute of Music, and the Julliard School. He has received numerous awards and honours for composition and has taught widely, most recently at the Curtis Institute.

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